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Ecological Ethics in Deuteronomy 20:19-20: A Case for Ecotheology in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the ecological instruction in Deuteronomy 20:19–20 in relation to environmental issues in Nigeria. It addressed the problem of resource destruction and the lack of scriptural engagement in environmental policy and ethics. The research focused on the command not to destroy fruit-bearing trees during warfare and examined its function within the legal context of ancient Israel. A discursive analytical method was used to interpret the language of the text and to explain how meaning was constructed within its historical and legal context. The study argued that the command conveyed a principle of restraint in resource use and defined limits during conflict. The analysis linked the text to current practices in Nigeria, where environmental degradation has continued through deforestation, overuse, and mismanagement of land. The research showed that the text contained an approach to resource control based on covenantal responsibility. The findings supported the development of ecotheology rooted in scriptural instruction. The study concluded that religious institutions could apply the text to promote ecological responsibility and guide collective action.

Keywords: *Deuteronomy 20:19–20, Ecotheology, Environmental Ethics, Nigeria, Resource Stewardship, Deforestation*

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Environmental issues are a global concern, affecting people worldwide. In Nigeria, effective responses to ecological concerns have been hindered by a lack of understanding and awareness among individuals, particularly in rural areas. [1] Deforestation, caused by unchecked logging for firewood and charcoal, leads to fuel shortages and biodiversity loss, worsened by changing socio-economic conditions and population growth. This results in forest reserves being converted for other purposes, posing risks to ecological stability and economic gains. The loss of native animal and plant species reduces ecological variety and threatens the sustainability of agriculture. High-yielding but less diversified cultivars are replacing traditional crop types, which have historically been crucial to food security. The country's economy relies heavily on agriculture, making it especially vulnerable to ecological catastrophes. Environmental deterioration and climate volatility severely hampered food security and agricultural output.

The Nigerian government and church have not done much to provide comprehensive solutions to ecological challenges. This paper aims to increase understanding of sustainable living and environmental stewardship among Nigerian Christians and non-Christians, closing the gap between religious beliefs and environmental concerns by providing applicable principles based on biblical teachings. The study uses a discursive analytical approach to analyse Deuteronomy 20:19–20, revealing underlying theological ideas relevant to today's environmental issues.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

The research employs a discursive analytical approach. The discursive analytical approach is a qualitative research method that investigates how language constructs meaning within specific contexts. [2] As Fairclough explains, discourse is not merely a linguistic act but a mode through which social structures are produced and reproduced. [3] It is based on the understanding that language is not a passive tool for communication but an active element in the formation of social realities. This view is supported by Gee, who argues that language, in any setting, actively identifies relationships and cultural assumptions. [4] Researchers using this method pay close attention to the use of language in texts, conversations, or written documents to uncover how meaning is and is maintained in particular settings. [5] The discursive-analytical approach examines how Deuteronomy 20:19–20 constructs meaning within its historical context. This method treats the biblical text not only as a vehicle for divine instruction but also as a discourse that engages specific cultural, legal, and environmental concerns of ancient Israel. Ellen Davis supports this by showing how biblical texts, especially agrarian laws, embed theological meaning in ecological terms.[6]

The passage addresses the treatment of trees during a military siege, prohibiting the destruction of fruit-bearing trees while allowing the cutting down of others for war-related purposes. Wolff observes that this command represents an early form of environmental ethics, designed to protect food sources even in wartime. [7] The discourse in this text extends considerations to the land and its resources. According to Bauckham, this point points toward a theology of creation that includes non-

[1] Victor Umaru, "Šabbathin Leviticus 25:2-5 as a Response to Environmental Degradation in Northern Nigeria,"*British Journal of Environmental Sciences,* 11, 1 (2023): 34.

[2] Tuija Aalto and Sari Pietikäinen, "Discourse Analysis," in *Methods in Linguistics*, ed. Jari Sivonen (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä Press, 2014).; Carla Willig, "Discursive Approaches," in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*, ed. Carla Willig and Wendy Stainton-Rogers (London: SAGE, 2017), 343–344.

[3] Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 54–55.

[4] James Paul Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 2–5.

[5] Gee, *Discourse Analysis*, 20–22.

[6] Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 75–78.

[7] Akiva Wolff, "A Closer Examination of Deuteronomy 20:19–20," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2011): 144–149.

human entities within moral and covenantal obligations.[8]

Language in this passage functions not merely as a command but as a tool of identity formation. Craigie argues that Israel's restraint during warfare, particularly the sparing of fruit trees, distinguished them from other nations and their covenantal identity.[9] The phrase, "for the tree of the field is man's life," has generated much interpretive discussion. Some scholars argue that this clause has a rhetorical function, urging restraint and aligning military action with a theological concern for life-sustaining resources. Hirsch, interpreting the Hebrew verb *shachath*, its association with corruption and disruption, views the tree as a symbol of sustenance that must not be destroyed needlessly.[10]

The discursive approach enables a closer reading of how the text's syntax, structure, and metaphors balance military necessity with ecological responsibility. Northcott affirms that ethical limitations on warfare in Scripture are a divine concern for both human and environmental welfare.[11] The construction of this command within the context of warfare situates the discourse within a tension between destruction and preservation. Tigay notes that this ethical balance was exceptional in the ancient Near East, where total war included environmental destruction.[12]

The passage limits the totalising violence of war by introducing a distinction between what may and may not be destroyed. This boundary is not simply practical but discursively constructed to divine instruction and covenantal order. Horrell argues that such distinctions are a biblical ethic where creation has inherent value beyond utilitarian function.[13] The prohibition against destroying fruit trees invokes a value system that recognises the long-term implications of environmental exploitation. As such, the text constructs an ethical vision that is not isolated from human conduct in war but integral to it. Using a discursive-analytical approach, one can observe how the passage is concerned with stewardship and obedience. Conradie argues that biblical ethics call for responsibility in how humans treat land and resources, particularly in light of their covenantal duties.[14]

The narrative voice constructs an argument that is not only legal but also moral. This is evident in the differentiation between trees that produce food and those that do not, signalling an awareness of sustenance, survival, and communal well-being. Bauckham and Deane-Drummond argue that such distinctions form the basis for a theology of care, where humans act not as exploiters but as members of a larger creation.[15] Language is a worldview in which, even in war, people must maintain boundaries with divine values. Therefore, Deuteronomy 20:19–20, when examined through the discursive analytical lens, reveals a theological discourse that embeds ecological ethics within the legal structure of warfare. The approach draws attention to how the text uses language to convey a moral view that includes the non-human world. This method does not isolate the text from its historical setting but rather how language functions within it to guide behaviour and covenantal identity.

3.0 THE NATURE OF THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS IN NIGERIA

Nigeria is one of the largest countries in Africa. It has the largest population of about 200

[8] Richard Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 36–41.

[9] Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 295.

[10] Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch: Translated and Explained*, trans. Isaac Levy (Gateshead: Judaica Press, 1982), 473.

[11] Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 112–115.

[12] Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, *The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 192–193.

[13] David G. Horrell, "Ecological Ethics," in *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 267–271.

[14] Ernst M. Conradie, "A (South) African Land Ethic?" in *African Environmental Ethics: A Critical Reader*, ed. Munamato Chemhuru (Cham: Springer, 2019), 75–92.

[15] Richard Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures*, 62–65; Celia E. Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008), 14–17.

million, and has the most incredible variety of cultures, lifestyles, cities, and topography. Its total land area is 923,768 square kilometres (356,668 square miles).[16] The country shares about 774 km (480 mi) of coastline with the Gulf of Guinea and 4,470 km (2,513 mi) of land border with Chad, Cameroon, Benin, and Niger. Lagos served as the nation's capital, with a population of roughly 2,500,000, until 1989, when Abuja replaced it.[17]

Nigeria's population and culture are diverse, with nearly every native African race present. Immigrants from southern and central Africa mixed with Sudanese people, while other groups, such as Shuwa-Arabs, Tuaregs, and Fulanis, concentrated in the north. Over 250 ethnic groups exist, with four significant groups comprising about 60% of the population: Hausa-Fulani in the North, Yoruba in the West, and Igbo in the East. Other groups include Kanuri, Binis, Ibibio, Ijaw, Itsekiri, Efik, Nupe, Tiv, and Jukun.[18]

Nigeria is a West African nation in the tropics. It is divided into five major ecological regions: the Sahel, Sudan Savannah, Guinea Savannah, Tropical Rainforest, and Swamp Forest.[19] The country has about 91.07 million hectares, as Cleaver and Shreiber suggest that 51% of this land surface is used for crop and pasture production (typical in Northern Nigeria). In contrast, the remaining 43% is split between forests, water bodies, and other uses such as construction and human settlements.[20] The northern region is primarily responsible for agriculture, which accounts for roughly 42% of the nation's GDP. Despite little rainfall and drought-like conditions, many plant species, including Acacia species, baobab trees, mango, orange, and Moringa species, as well as soils suitable for the growth of crops like cereals (millet, rice, corn, sorghum, and maise) and legumes (soybeans and cowpea), inhabit the region with what is perceived to be its harsh weather conditions. This area's immense "fertile" territory has the potential to lead to an agricultural revolution. However, most farming methods are still done by hand, perhaps because the northern states lack the economic capacity to commercialise agriculture.

The land is a vital resource for food production, biodiversity protection, management of natural water systems, and carbon sequestration. However, desertification, land degradation, and drought have increased in Nigeria over the 20th and 21st centuries. The most urgent environmental issues are drought and desertification, which result in vegetation transitioning from grasses to bushes and eventually to desert-like conditions. Between 50% and 75% of some states, such as Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Adamawa, Jigawa, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Yobe, and Zamfara, are experiencing desertification, affecting around 35% of the land area. The desertification process also threatens 10% to 15% of land areas in neighbouring states to the south. The nation currently loses 351,000 hectares of its landmass each year to desert-like conditions, which are thought to be moving southward at roughly 0.6 kilometres per year. Alfisols, acrisols, ferralsols, and arenosols are the lowest-productivity soil types in Nigeria, accounting for nearly 50% of all soils. This is because they have low organic matter content and poor moisture retention—these low-grade soils, except for ferralsols. About 40% of the land was used for intensive agriculture, 21% for extensive (grazing) agriculture, and 0.6% for urban development.

[16] CIA World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency, "Nigeria," The World Factbook (Washington, DC: CIA), https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/nigeria/. Accessed, 28/11/2025.; World Bank Climate Profile, World Bank, "Climate Risk Country Profile: Nigeria," 2021, 4, https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/15918-WB_Nigeria%20Country%20Profile-WEB.pdf. Accessed, 28/11/2025.

[17] "History & People – Nigerian Embassy Berlin." https://nigeriaembassygermany.org/history-and-people.htm. March 14th, 2024.

[18] "History & People – Nigerian Embassy Berlin." https://nigeriaembassygermany.org/history-and-people.htm. March 14th, 2024.

[19] "History & People – Nigerian Embassy Berlin." https://nigeriaembassygermany.org/history-and-people.htm. March 14th, 2024.

[20] "Country pasture/forage resource profiles: Nigeria." www fa0.org/ag/GP/AGPC/doc/Counproi/nigenamigena.htm.

The remaining area (less than 39%) supported natural ecosystems frequently disturbed by humans. The quality of the agricultural land resources was related to soil fertility, which depended on several variables.[21] Many crops in Nigeria are sensitive to temperature changes and salinity fluctuations, and 85% of the country's agriculture is rain-fed. In the Northeast, crop yields have decreased by 23% due to drought and rising temperatures. Rising temperatures and declining precipitation exacerbate the threat of widespread desertification.[22]

Although there is no comprehensive data about deforestation in Nigeria, the environmental crisis paints a rather grim picture. The World Resources 1990-1991 Report states that the rate of deforestation in Nigeria in the 1980s was estimated at 400,000 hectares annually, while reforestation was a mere 32,000 hectares. This translates to an annual rate of forest loss of 2.7%. In 2010, Nigeria had 10.9Mha of natural forest, covering over 12% of its terrestrial area. In 2020, the nation lost 97.8kha of natural forestry, equal to 59.5Mt of CO_2 emissions.[23] If that trend continues, all forests will be gone before the middle of this century. The country is estimated to have only 30% forest cover (about 277,132 sq. km). Accordingly, 60 million hectares of forest and woodland in 1897 were reduced to about 9.6 million hectares by 1986. Nigeria lost 409,700 hectares of forest yearly between 1990 and 2000. It sums to an average annual deforestation rate of 2.38%. It was flanked by 2000 and 2005, and the rate of forest change increased by 31.2% to 3.12% per annum. Between 1990 and 2005, the nation lost 35.7% of its forestry cover or about 6,145,000 hectares. Nigeria lost -1,230,000 hectares, which is 1 of its prime forest cover. [24] "From 2002 to 2023, Nigeria lost 178 kha of humid primary forest, making up 14% of its total tree cover loss in the same period. Nigeria's total area of humid primary forest decreased by 9.4% in this period."[25] Also, "From 2001 to 2023, Nigeria lost 1.33 Mha of tree cover, equivalent to a 13% decrease since 2000, and 724 Mt of CO_2e emissions."[26] Therefore, "In 2010, Nigeria had 10.6 Mha of natural forest, extending over 12% of its land area. In 2023, it lost 81.2 kha of natural forest, equivalent to 54.6 Mt of CO_2 emissions."[27]

Similarly, groundwater has been depleted and contaminated in many arid and semi-arid regions due to excessive extraction and leaching of fertiliser and pesticide residues from planted fields. As a result, the prevalence of waterborne infections has considerably increased in recent years. Rivers in the far north feed the Niger and Benue rivers and Lake Chad, which have decreased in size from 25,000 km^2 to 2,000 km^2 since 1960.[28] Millions of residents depend on farming and fishing for a living; therefore, the lake's shrinkage impacts their way of life. The Hadejia, Jama'are, and Misau Rivers formed the headwaters of the Komadougou-Yobe River, which flows from North Central to Northeast before draining into Lake Chad in the far Northeast. This system includes the Hadejia-Nguru wetlands' freshwater estuary (6,200,000 hectares). Due to floodplain cultivation, the natural freshwater marshes and swamps along the Niger, Benue, and Hadejia Rivers had significantly diminished by 1990. The level of

[21] I. Chukwu, "Economic Analysis of Aggregated Agricultural Land Resources Quality in Nigeria." *European Journal of Agriculture and Forest Research*, 6,2 (2018):1– 15.

[22] "Figures cited in Federal Ministry of Environment, National Policy on Desertification and Drought." FME *Federal Ministry of Environment*, 2008.

[23] "Nigerian Deforestation, Rate & Statistic." https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/NGA/?category=summary&dashboardPrompts&showMap=true.

[24] "Nigerian Deforestation Rate and Related Forestry." https://rainforests.mongabay.com/deforestation/forest-information-archive/Nigeria.htm#:~:text=12.2%25%20

[25] Global Forest Watch, "Nigeria," https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/NGA/. Accessed, May 15th, 2024.

[26] Global Forest Watch, "Nigeria," https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/NGA/.

[27] Global Forest Watch, "Nigeria," https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/NGA/.

[28] Country Environmental Profile, *Study of the Review Update CSP of Nigeria and Review of EDF Intervention in the North, Nigeria (*PZRICIP Consortium, 2012), 58.

water resource deterioration in Nigeria has reached a point where governmental and non-governmental organisations must act immediately and urgently. Such treatments appear to have far more social benefits than social costs.

Agricultural activities are primarily responsible for land degradation, attributed to human activities such as indiscriminate tree cutting without replacement, crop development, and pastoral land development. This leads to the loss of natural vegetation cover and to exposure to weather factors such as rain and wind. Skoupy argues that human activity changes over the past 30 years have contributed to West Africa's ongoing loss of plant cover and soil fertility.[29]The situation in Nigeria is expected to increase due to changes in crop and livestock production practices and increasing demand for forest products. About 80% of the population in northern Nigeria is employed in farming and nomadic pastoralism, both of which require land utilisation. Many impoverished farmers relocate to new plots of land due to declining fertility and the constant need to clear virgin land.[30] This increased expansion, in which undeveloped or uncultivated lands are exploited for crop cultivation, leads to the destruction of trees that reduce soil erosion risk, making forest resources crucial for maintaining land quality. The need for food, fibre, and agricultural products has led to intensive agriculture, degrading land and decreasing yield. Underdevelopment, illiteracy, and a lack of alternative employment sources lead to the overuse and degradation of available resources. Activities such as illegal tree cutting, hunting, encroachment on forest reserves, and poaching are driven every day by basic needs and greed. These actions still occur despite the potential negative impact on well-being.

Most rural farmers in the state use fuelwood as their primary cooking fuel. Also, overgrazing by animals and the failure to allow farmland to fallow. According to Olagunju, the lack of designated grazing areas leads to uncontrolled grazing, resulting in overgrazing.[31] These are expected to have the following effects: soil erosion due to wind and water, and animal trampling that destroys the soil.

Another harmful environmental practice is intensifying farming and reducing fallow periods. In most farming in Nigeria today, continuous agricultural output is almost the norm. Fallow periods typically last between one and two years, substantially less than the seven to ten years needed to recover soil fertility.[32]This continuous cropping has resulted in a sharp drop in soil fertility, primarily manifested in rapid soil acidification and reductions in organic carbon, total nitrogen, and cation exchange capacity. [33] In states like Adamawa, Taraba, and Benue, among others, vast tracts of natural forests are being exploited for species such as Khaya spp., Nauclea diderrichii (opepe), Terminalia ivorensis (Odigbo), Terminalia s*uperba* (Afara), and *Triplochiton scleroxylon* (Obeche). The region's forest resources continue to face significant risks from heavy logging and unlawful exploitation of other species.

4.0 ECOLOGICAL ETHICS IN DEUTERONOMY 20:19-20

The Book of Deuteronomy is a crucial text that bridges the Israelites' journey through the wilderness and their entrance into the Promised Land. It is structured around a series of speeches by Moses, who uses this opportunity to impart crucial laws, guidelines, and exhortations. The book is set in the final stage of the Israelites' 40-year journey through the desert, just before they

[29] J. Skoupy, Desertification in Africa: Agricultural and Meteorological Program. Proc. Regional Training Seminar on Drought and Desertification in Africa (Addis Ababa: WMO, 1987), 33– 45.

[30] E.B. Barbier, "The Economic Linkages Between Rural Poverty and Land Degradation: Some Evidence From Africa." *Agric. Ecosyst. Environ*. 82 (2000): 355– 370.

[31] T.E. Olagunju, "Drought, desertification and the Nigerian environment," *A Review*, (2017).

[32] A.A. Yusus, and H.A. Yusuf, "Evaluation of Strategies for Soil Fertility Improvement in Northern Nigeria and the way Forward," *Journal of Agronomy,* 7 (2008):15– 24.

[33] Yusuf and Yusuf, "Evaluation of Strategies for Soil Fertility Improvement in Northern Nigeria and the way Forward."15– 24.

enter Canaan. The events of Deuteronomy occur on the plains of Moab, east of the Jordan River, opposite Jericho. The primary audience is the new generation of Israelites born during the wilderness wanderings, who needed instruction and encouragement to live faithfully in the land they were about to enter.

Deuteronomy focuses on three main speeches by Moses: the First Speech (Chapters 1-4), the Second Speech (Chapters 5-26), and the Third Speech (Chapters 27-30). These three speeches present different aspects of Israel's journey from Horeb to Moab. The book introduces Moses' role as a prophet and establishes a pattern for future prophetic leadership. The book contains forward-looking elements, including prophecies and conditions for future kingship. It is attributed to Moses and provides a theology for understanding Israel's history from the conquest of Canaan to the exile. Deuteronomy impacts Jewish tradition, shaping Jewish law and ethics. It is frequently quoted in the New Testament, with Jesus citing it during his temptation in the wilderness. The themes of covenant, law, and prophecy in Deuteronomy are foundational for Christian theology, particularly in understanding the relationship between the Old and New Covenants.

Deuteronomy 20 is a chapter in the Deuteronomic Code, a legal collection that outlines laws and ethical guidelines for the Israelites. It provides detailed instructions on the conduct of warfare for the Israelites, as well as on justice, mercy, and ethical behaviour, even in times of conflict. The chapter begins with encouragement and faith that God is with the Israelites. Exemptions from service are given to men who have built a new house, planted a vineyard, betrothed a wife, or are fearful and fainthearted. The chapter also outlines rules of engagement, including offering peace before attacking a city, taking spoils of war, and destroying Canaanite cities. For cities within the Promised Land, the Israelites are commanded to destroy the inhabitants to prevent adopting the detestable practices of the Canaanite peoples. The chapter also addresses environmental considerations, with fruit-bearing trees spared for their food supply and only non-fruit-bearing trees cut down for siege works. This directive reflects a concern for preserving essential resources and recognising the long-term consequences of environmental destruction.

4.1 Exposition of Deuteronomy 20:19-20

In the ancient Near East, war was a joint military strategy used to capture fortified cities, lasting months or even years. Resource scarcity was a significant issue, as the besieging army needed to sustain itself while maintaining pressure on the city, and the inhabitants had to survive on whatever supplies they had managed to store. The management and preservation of resources were critical in this situation. In ancient warfare, trees were crucial for food supply, strategic resources, and agricultural value. Fruit trees, such as olive, fig, date, and pomegranate, were vital for food and products for trade and economic stability. Destroying fruit-bearing trees would have dire consequences immediately and in the future. In many ancient Near Eastern cultures, trees held symbolic and religious significance, with certain trees considered sacred and associated with fertility, life, and divine blessing. Destroying such trees could be seen as an affront to people, their deities, and their cultural identity. According to Akiva Wolff, the Torah prohibits needless destruction in military campaigns, demonstrating that even in extreme situations, it commands its adherents to limit destruction. This is particularly important during offensive sieges, where people can minimise environmental destruction. The Torah uses the principle of *kal va-homer* to describe the least lenient case in which needless destruction could be permitted, thereby proving that needless destruction is prohibited in all other cases.[34]

Environmental ethics were inherent in ancient Near Eastern culture, as was an understanding of stewardship and respect for creation. The Mosaic covenant shapes the

[34] Akiva Wolff, "A Closer Examination Of Deuteronomy 20:19– 20," *Jewish Bible Quarterly,* Vol. 39, No. 3 (2011): 144.

Israelites' context in Deuteronomy, which includes numerous instructions for living in the land God is giving them. The Sabbath and land concept, as a divine mandate for rest and renewal, extends to the preservation of fruit trees. Previous instructions in the Torah, such as Leviticus 19:23-25, outline laws concerning the treatment of the land and its produce.

Deuteronomy 20:19

כִּי־תָצ֣וּר אֶל־עִ֗יר יָמִ֤ים רַבִּים֙ לְהִלָּחֶם֙ עָלֶ֔יהָ לִתְפְּשָׂ֖הּ לֹא־ תַשְׁחִ֣ית אֶת־עֵצָ֔הּ לִנְדֹּ֥חַ עָלָ֖יו גַּרְזֶ֑ן כִּי֩ מִמֶּ֨נּוּ תֹאכֵ֜ל וְאֹת֗וֹ לֹ֤א תִכְרֹת֙ כִּ֣י הָאָדָ֔ם עֵ֥ץ הַשָּׂדֶ֖ה לָבֹ֥א מִפָּנֶ֖יךָ בַּמָּצֹֽור׃

When you besiege a city for many days, making war against it in order to capture it, you shall not ruin its trees by wielding an axe against them, because you may eat of them, but you shall not cut them down. For are the trees of the field human, that you should besiege them?

The command to preserve fruit-bearing trees during a siege represents an early form of environmental ethics, the importance of safeguarding natural resources against unnecessary destruction. However, Craigie says, "The practice of cutting down trees and laying waste on the land was employed by the Egyptians and other military powers in the Near East." [35] The Bible also believes that "A common tactic employed by invaders in the ancient Near East was to cut off and destroy the enemy's sources of supply: crops, vineyards, orchards, cisterns, wells. The Babylonians' invading and eventually conquering Judah first rampaged through the Judean countryside before marching on Jerusalem, besieging it, and, in time, plundering it (2 Kgs 24)." [36] Craigie further asserts that,

> In contrast to the total havoc wreaked by the great military powers of that time, Israel was to discriminate in the use of its destructive power and to be guided by good sense and utilitarian requirements. Fruit trees were not to be cut down; not only would they provide food for the besieging army, but after the victory, they would become a part of Israel's new possessions.[37]

This principle holds that warfare should be conducted with consideration for its long-term ecological impact. The preservation of fruit trees ensures the economic stability of the land, as destroying these trees would mean a loss of a renewable source of food and income, with devastating consequences for current and future land inhabitants. Also, the text emphasises the importance of maintaining a stable and reliable food supply. The ethical distinction between combatants and non-combatants is made through the rhetorical question, "Are the trees people that you should besiege them?" Craige further adds that

> …though trees might belong to the enemy, they were not an enemy, and they were not to be treated with vindictive wrath as if they were persons. Even non-fruit-bearing trees should not be cut down at random, but only in order to fulfil particular requirements, such as building siege works. The exact significance of siege-works (mātsôr) is not certain, but it is known that battering-rams, siege-towers, and ladders were employed in Near Eastern warfare; all of these would have required wood in their construction. Until it falls, once again, eventual victory for the army of the Lord is taken as a certain outcome of the siege.[38]

The Hebrew word *שָׁחַת*, derived from the root of the word *תַּשְׁחִית*, is chosen to denote destruction due to its association with corruption and spoilage. The root of *שָׁחַת* is commonly translated as "spoil" or "corrupt." [39] Samson Raphael Hirsch, based on the etymology of biblical Hebrew, explains that *שָׁחַת* is a pit that interrupts the path of someone striving towards their goal, leading to destruction. This concept

[35] Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 255.
[36] Mark E. Biddle, *Deuteronomy* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth &Helwys, 2003), 318.
[37] Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 255.
[38] Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 256.
[39] Wolff, "A Closer Examination Of Deuteronomy 20:19–20," 145.

is related to שׁחד, bribery, and slaughter, which interrupt the progress of an animal.[40] Hirsch's explanation of שָׁחַת also reveals a positivist worldview, wherein the created world and everything in it have a constructive purpose and moral destiny, and there is a moral requirement to use resources for their proper purpose to avoid corruption and spoilage. Hirsch states that;

> … our text becomes the most comprehensive warning to human beings not to misuse the position which God has given them as masters of the world and its matter to capricious, passionate or merely thoughtless wasteful destruction of anything on Earth. Only for wise use has God laid the world at our feet when He said to Man, "subdue the world and have dominion over it" (Gen. 1:28 et seq.).[41]

Wolff further opines that the phrase הָאָדָם עֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה presents two exciting concepts: the comparison of man to a fruit-producing tree and the use of the words tree of the field. A field is an area of land modified by humans to enhance its ability to produce benefits, requiring cultivation, nurturing, and care. In this interpretation, a tree of the field implies the need for proper nurturing and attention from man, as opposed to something that grows wildly on its own.[42] This distinction reveals a broader ethical principle: limiting the scope of warfare to combatants and sparing non-combatant entities, including people and resources. The non-combatant principle is that warfare should be conducted to minimise harm to non-combatants, which is foundational to just war theory.

Deuteronomy 20:20

רַ֗ק עֵ֚ץ אֲשֶׁר־תֵּדַ֣ע כִּי־לֹ֣א־עֵ֔ץ מַאֲכָ֖ל ה֣וּא אֹת֑וֹ תַּשְׁחִ֣ית וְכָרָ֔תָּ וּבָנִ֥יתָ מָצ֛וֹר עַל־הָעִ֥יר אֲשֶׁר־הִ֖וא עֹשָׂ֣ה עִמְּךָ֑ מִלְחָמָ֕ה עַ֖ד רִדְתָּֽהּ׃

Only the trees that you know are not food-bearing trees may you ruin and cut down; then you may build siege-works against the city which is making war with you, until it falls.

The word, עֵץ מַאֲכָל, which is translated as 'trees for food' or 'fruit-producing trees', Wolff prefers the interpretation of R. Avraham Ibn Ezra, who argues that the life of a man is from a tree of the field, and not cutting down the tree is attached to coming before the city in a siege. This verse qualifies the previous verse, establishing that only 'trees for food' are protected. Trees that are not for food כִּי־לֹא־עֵץ מַאֲכָל הוּא may be cut down.[43] Wolff also notes that the words עֵץ and מַאֲכָל have connotations in Jewish tradition that go beyond their literal translations. [44] The word עֵץ is commonly translated as 'tree' in the Bible and 'wood' in rabbinic literature, but it can also refer to something beyond its literal meaning. In the Jewish tradition, the word מַאֲכָל has broader connotations than 'for food'. In the Jewish tradition, it can include any benefit that man derives from something, making עֵץ מַאֲכָלor, or 'trees for food,' more broadly interpreted as conduits through which man can derive benefits.[45]

The verse encourages the use of non-fruit-bearing trees to construct siege works, ensuring immediate tactical needs are met without compromising essential resources. This methodical approach prevents the depletion of vital assets for survival and prosperity. The directive promotes sustainable practices that consider the long-term impact of actions on the environment and well-being. In ancient warfare, non-fruit-bearing trees were used to construct siege devices, demonstrating strategic resource

[40] R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch, Translated and Explained*, trans. Isaac Levy (Gateshead: 1982), vol. 1, 138–139, on Gen. 6:11.

[41] Samson Raphael Hirsch, The Pentateuch, vol. 5, Deuteronomy, trans. Isaac Levy, 2nd ed. rev. (Gateshead, London, England: Judaica Press, 1982), 395.

[42] Wolff, "A Closer Examination Of Deuteronomy 20:19–20," 147.

[43] Wolff, "A Closer Examination Of Deuteronomy 20:19–20," 148.

[44] Wolff, "A Closer Examination Of Deuteronomy 20:19–20," 148.

[45] Wolff, "A Closer Examination of Deuteronomy 20:19–20," 149.

management and the ability to adapt to immediate needs without jeopardising future resources. The directive also exemplifies responsible resource use, stewardship, and long-term thinking, benefiting current and future generations.

5.0 A CASE FOR ECOTHEOLOGY IN NIGERIA

Ecotheology (ecological theology), also known as environmental theology or Green theology, gained prominence in the late 20th century amid growing awareness of environmental crises such as climate change, deforestation, pollution, and biodiversity loss. It was influenced by the work of Lutheran pastor and theologian Joseph Sittler in the early 1950s. [46] Since the days of pioneering ecological theologians like Sittler, many others, Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox, have seen the need to articulate Christian faith in light of ecological challenges.[47] Much work in the late 1960s and early 1970s addressed historian Lynn White Jr.'s contentious 1967 paper, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis." According to White, several Christian theological teachings contributed to the development of modern science and technology, bringing about the current ecological catastrophe; hence, Christian theology has a significant portion of the guilt for the current ecological issues. Although White admits that "More science and technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion or rethink our old one…since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink and refuel our nature and destiny." [48] Also, Richard Bauckham argues that,

> In response, Christians sensitive to the ecological problems of recent decades have insisted that this is not a mandate for exploitation but an appointment to stewardship. In other words, the human role in relation to other creatures is one of care and service, exercised on behalf of God and with accountability to God. Creation has value not just for our use, but also for itself and for God, and humans are to care for creation as something that has inherent value.[49]

Therefore, ecotheology speaks of the human calling as stewardship, caring for creation, or earthkeeping. The central point is that humans are supposed to care for the Earth and its creatures, longing to live on a renewed and redeemed Earth, renewed and redeemed by God and His grace.[50] According to Isaac Boaheng, "Human rule must be within the limits imposed by the sovereign Ruler (God) who has given humankind delegated political authority." [51] According to this interpretation, human lordship over other creations entails descending and interacting with the subjects on an equal footing as opposed to exercising authoritarian control over them. The ability to establish domination does not permit unthinking actions or environmental abuse.[52]

The livelihoods of people in Nigeria heavily depend on natural resources. Unsustainable agricultural practices and environmental degradation have reduced agricultural productivity, caused soil erosion, and destroyed habitats. The region faces severe challenges, including increased disease incidence, migration driven by harsh living conditions, and reliance on unsustainable income sources. Given Nigeria's severe

[46] S. Bouma-Prediger, "Green Theology," in *Global Dictionary of Theology*, William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, eds. (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, USA, 2008), 358– 9.
[47] Bouma-Prediger, "Green Theology," 358– 9.
[48] Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," Science 155, no. 3767 (March 10, 1967): 1207.
[49] Richard Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2011), 3.
[50] Bouma-Prediger, "Green Theology," 359.
[51] Isaac Boaheng, "Theological Principles for Ecological Sustainability and Human Flourishing," *International Journal of Social Science Research and Review*, Volume 6, Issue 2 (2023): 418.
[52] Boaheng, "Theological Principles for Ecological Sustainability and Human Flourishing," 418.

environmental problems and the ingrained cultural and religious influences that mould social attitudes toward the natural world, ecotheology is essential in the nation. With more than 200 million people living across various natural zones, Nigeria faces severe environmental problems, including deforestation, desertification, water pollution, and biodiversity loss. Here are three frameworks that offer ethical responses to these issues, bringing ecotheology into Nigerian contexts and inspiring religious leaders to take environmental action.

5.1. Sustainable Resource Management.

Deuteronomy 20:19-20 offers a specific directive within the broader context of Israelite warfare, prohibiting the destruction of fruit-bearing trees during military campaigns while allowing the construction of siege works from non-fruit-bearing trees. The command to spare fruit trees in warfare reveals that the Israelites are to preserve essential resources. God demonstrates a concern for immediate needs and future well-being, embodying a just and merciful approach to resource management. Preserving fruit trees underscores the intrinsic value of creation in God's eyes, that every part of creation has worth and should be treated with respect and care, even in challenging circumstances like war.

In Nigeria, a nation rich in natural resources but facing significant environmental challenges, fruit trees contribute to its economic preservation, ensuring the land remains productive and the economy thrives. Protecting fruit trees also maintains food security, avoiding potential famine and malnutrition in the aftermath of conflict. According to Munamato Chemhuru, African ontology emphasises the teleological connection between humans and the natural environment, which is crucial for understanding the moral status of nature.[53] The teleology of being is closely linked to the moral status of the environment, and there must be a fundamental teleological connection between humans and nature. A pluralist approach to the teleological grounds for moral status in African ontology is based on various appeals to moral status, such as African biocentrism or vitalism, sentience, the status of a subject of a life, well-being, and the degree of vital force.[54]

In African ontology, Chemhuru holds that humans are understood teleologically as purposive beings who should achieve their ends without necessarily disadvantaging others with independent lives and goals. Ethical obligations towards the environment should be informed by a respectful relationship with aspects of the natural environment, such as animals, plants, air, soil, rocks, and water bodies.[55] Sentience is also closely linked to teleology because it determines whether a given being will achieve its purpose for existing. The idea of beingness or ontological status is compatible with considering non-human beings, especially non-animate beings, as all have a purpose for existence and moral status. Non-living beings are considered vital because they possess life, thereby complementing the teleological dimension of existence.[56]

5.2 Distinguish and Safeguard Essential Ecosystems

The law of warfare reminds man that fruit-bearing trees sustain his life and must not be used to impose man's death. Man relies on fruit-bearing trees for their cultivation, which heavily depends on man. In some environments, they can exist apart from man, but man's care makes them flourish. There is mutual interdependence between man and fruit-bearing trees.[57] The dominion covenant consists of a hierarchy: "God > man > nature." Man serves God, while nature serves man. God is not dependent on either, but man is dependent on both. Man is a

[53] MunamatoChemhuru, "The Moral Status of Nature: An African Understanding," in *African Environmental Ethics: A Critical Reader*, MunamatoChemhuru, ed. (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland AG., 2019), 31– 35.

[54] Chemhuru, "The Moral Status of Nature: An African Understanding," 35– 41.

[55] Chemhuru, "The Moral Status of Nature: An African Understanding," 35– 41.

[56] Chemhuru, "The Moral Status of Nature: An African Understanding," 35– 41.

[57] Gary North,*Inheritance and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Deuteronomy*Volume 2 (Dallas: Point Five Press, 2012), 580.

unique creature made in God's image, ruling over nature. He is also an interdependent creation, and God requires him to acknowledge his two-way dependence and responsibility. [58] Resource use and environmental impact are increasingly relevant globally, particularly in regions like Nigeria, where conflicts intersect with ecological challenges. "Are the trees people, that you should besiege them?" (Deut 20:19c) provides guidelines for warfare regarding resource management. Michael S. Northcott states that humans are distinguished from plants and animals by their nature, intellect, and consciousness.

However, the biblical concept of covenant recognises the unique integrity of all aspects of creation, including personal and impersonal aspects, demonstrating God's love for both material and embodied reality.[59] This is achieved by "The practice of awareness is a way of embodying spirituality, of 'seeing,' of nurturing a deeper mindfulness of God's presence in the world and our everyday, mundane lives." [60] Ecotheology within Abrahamic traditions acknowledges God's role as Creator and humanity's responsibility as stewards of creation. In Nigeria, contemporary conflicts over resources, ethnic tensions, and religious extremism intersect with environmental degradation, posing complex challenges for sustainable development and peacebuilding. Ethical considerations in warfare, informed by ecotheological principles, are crucial for minimising environmental impact, protecting ecological hotspots, and promoting affected areas. The principle of prioritising the protection of essential ecosystems during conflict involves distinguishing between life-sustaining ecosystems, such as fruit-bearing trees, and critical water sources. This involves mapping and identifying these ecosystems, establishing protected zones, raising awareness and training, implementing legal frameworks to protect them, and developing post-conflict rehabilitation plans.

5.3 Environmental Stewardship

According to Ernst M. Conradie, God has entrusted the land and all its natural resources to all people to care for, keep, and use within. This requires a vision of sustainability that includes a just sharing of the Earth's resources, working together in participation in decision-making processes, the right to contribute to and sustain the common good, respect for Indigenous knowledge systems, and the establishment of structures and mechanisms to ensure the provision of daily needs.[61]

The land does not belong only to humans; instead, humans belong to the land. Humans came from the Earth and will return, living on the Earth for the flourishing of the Earth. The Earth's well-being transcends all of us because it is something bigger than our interests. The land does not belong to itself but to its Creator, who sustains the Earth and will eventually restore it. [62] In response to these considerations, we must confess that we have not always allowed the Earth and its creatures to flourish and acknowledge our responsibility to keep the land and care for it as it cares for us. Elsewhere, Bauckham suggests that "stewardship is not enough." The reason is that "the notion of 'stewardship" too easily implies that nature in some way needs us if it is to realise its full potential." [63] This is because "much

[58] North, *Inheritance and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Deuteronomy,*580.

[59] Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 127.

[60] Daniel L. Brunner, Jennifer L. Butler, and A. J. Swoboda, *Introducing Evangelical Ecotheology: Foundations in Scripture, Theology, History, and Praxis* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing Group, 2014), 223.

[61] Ernst M. Conradie, "A (South) African Land Ethic? The Viability of an Ecocentric Approachto Environmental Ethics and Philosophy," in *African Environmental Ethics: A Critical Reader*, Munamato Chemhuru, ed. (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland AG., 2019), 133.

[62] Conradie, "A (South) African Land Ethic? The Viability of an Ecocentric Approach to Environmental Ethics and Philosophy," 134

[63] Richard Bauckham, "Being Human in the Community of Creation: A Biblical Perspective," in *Ecotheology: A Christian \conversation,* Kiara A. Jorgenson and Alan G. Padgett, eds. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2020), 19.

modern Christian thinking about the human relationship to the rest of creation is deeply in error, in that it has been understood as a purely vertical relationship, a hierarchy in which humans are placed over the rest of creation in a position of power and authority."[64] Therefore, "We urgently need to recover a biblical view of our solidarity with the rest of God's creatures on this planet, which is our common home. We need to locate ourselves again where we belong—within creation."[65]

David G. Horrell asserts that the creation story of Genesis 1 (1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31) emphasises the "good" of everything God made. At the same time, the covenant of Genesis 9 binds God to the whole Earth (9:12–16). The Psalms and the Book of Job emphasise the vocation of all creation to praise God, while Job punctures human arrogance. The prophetic literature depicts a restored creation, while the New Testament texts suggest that the whole creation is bound up in God's transforming work in Christ, a reconciliation of the cosmos.[66]The need to understand this led Celia E. Deane-Drummond to develop some Bible interpretation principles to keep us alert. The first principle of intrinsic worth emphasises that creation's worth arises from God's word. The second principle of interconnectedness is universally familiar, but the Earth Bible team resists the idea of hierarchy. The third principle of voice asserts that the Earth can raise its voice against injustice, viewing the Earth in kinship with humanity. The fourth principle of purpose claims that the universe, Earth, and its components are part of a dynamic cosmic design, each contributing to the purpose. The fifth principle of mutual custodianship reflects humanity's role in relation to the Earth, recognising the bonds between humanity and other creatures. The sixth principle of resistance asserts that the Earth and its components actively resist injustices humans impose.[67]

The significance of protecting environmental resources and encouraging sustainable behaviours is made clear by Deuteronomy 20:19–20. It is especially pertinent to Nigeria, which is struggling with issues of sustainable growth and environmental deterioration. In Nigeria, ecological awareness is necessary to plan and prioritise biodiversity protection, save endangered species, maintain ecosystems, and advance sustainable agricultural methods. With their many advantages, trees play a vital role in the ecosystem, helping sustain life on Earth and preserve ecological equilibrium. Because they use photosynthesis to absorb carbon dioxide (CO2) from the atmosphere, they are essential in reducing the effects of climate change. The process of sequestering carbon reduces the concentration of greenhouse gases that cause global warming. Forests store large volumes of carbon that might otherwise contribute to climate change as carbon sinks. Cutting down trees contributes to global warming and its related effects, such as rising sea levels, more intense weather, and a decline in biodiversity, by releasing this stored carbon back into the atmosphere. Numerous plant and animal species, many of which are endemic to specific areas, are found in forests. Numerous species are at risk due to habitat loss resulting from forest degradation caused by tree cutting. Biodiversity is necessary for ecosystems to be resilient and stable, and to provide services such as pollination, nutrient management, and insect control. Thus, preserving biodiversity and guaranteeing the well-being and proper operation of ecosystems depend heavily on protecting trees and forests. Trees are essential in preventing soil erosion because of the stabilising effect of their root systems on the soil. This supports the fertility and structure of the soil, both of which are necessary for agriculture and the survival of plant life.

Furthermore, trees help to control the water cycle by allowing water to seep into the soil, lowering runoff, and preserving groundwater levels. These processes are

[64] Bauckham, "Being Human in the Community of Creation: A Biblical Perspective," 19.
[65] Bauckham, "Being Human in the Community of Creation: A Biblical Perspective," 19.
[66] David G. Horrell, "Ecological Ethics," in *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, Joel B. Green, ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 259.
[67] Celia E. Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2008), 109– 110.

disturbed by deforestation, which increases agricultural production, degrades the soil, and makes an area more susceptible to floods and droughts. Therefore, careless tree cutting exhausts these resources, causing financial losses and endangering the means of subsistence of those living near them. Natural settings and forests are popular tourist destinations, bringing in substantial revenue and creating numerous job opportunities. Sustainable travel to natural places, encouraged by ecotourism, depends on preserving forests and biodiversity. People's quality of life is improved by forests' aesthetic and recreational value, which also creates opportunities for environmental awareness and education. However, deforestation diminishes these benefits and jeopardises the development of a sustainable tourist industry.

In some parts, deep cultural and spiritual links to woods and trees are shared by several indigenous people in Nigeria. These depend on wood for traditional knowledge, cultural traditions, and means of subsistence. In addition to endangering their way of existence, deforestation causes the loss of priceless cultural legacy and customary ecological knowledge. Indigenous peoples' sovereignty and cultural identity depend on protecting trees and forests. Because they provide places for social contact, leisure, and recreation, trees and green spaces improve the well-being and cohesiveness of local societies. Urban parks and woods improve the quality of life in urban areas by offering opportunities for physical activity and a break from the city. The loss of green spaces and deforestation has a detrimental effect on social cohesion and well-being.

Trees play a crucial role in maintaining air quality by absorbing pollutants and releasing oxygen into the atmosphere. They also filter pollutants through photosynthesis, reducing the incidence of cardiovascular disease, respiratory ailments, and total mortality in urban areas with high tree cover. However, deforestation negatively impacts public health and air quality, especially in high-population areas. Natural settings, such as parks and forests, improve mental health and well-being by reducing stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Green spaces offer opportunities for socialising and connecting with nature, both of which are beneficial for mental health. Forests and trees also help prevent the spread of disease by preserving ecological balance and regulating populations of disease vectors. Medicinal plants found in forests are used in both traditional and modern medicine. Therefore, preserving forests and trees is essential for public health and disease prevention.

These advantages are seriously threatened by deforestation and other unsustainable activities that destroy trees, with dire repercussions for the environment, biodiversity, and human societies. Preserving trees and forests for the benefit of current and future generations is necessary by appreciating the inherent worth of trees, encouraging sustainable behaviours, and bolstering legislative and lobbying initiatives. According to Isaac Boaheng, "human actions should respect nature, aim to meet needs, and protect the earth for future generations." [68] It is necessary to protect the environment, and there is a moral and ethical obligation to protect trees for the sake of present and future generations and the Earth.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The church in Nigeria should play a crucial role in promoting environmental stewardship and tree conservation by integrating ecological awareness into its teachings and activities. By incorporating environmental stewardship into teachings, establishing church-led tree planting initiatives, promoting sustainable practices among congregations, developing environmental education programs, advocating for environmental policies, supporting community-based conservation projects, partnerships with environmental organisations, implementing eco-friendly church practices, hosting environmental events and conferences,

[68] Isaac Boaheng, "From Personal Holiness to Ecological Holiness: A Wesleyan-Theological Response to Creation's Cry in Contemporary Ghana," *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* (ERATS), Volume 10 Issue 14 (2024): 24.

and encouraging personal responsibility and collective action, the church should lead by example and mobilise its followers towards sustainable practices. The church should inspire its followers to view environmental care as a spiritual responsibility by focusing on biblical mandates and scriptural references to the importance of trees and nature.

The government must implement effective local and national policies to save trees and stop deforestation. These rules should involve the creation of forest reserves and protected areas, as well as incentives for sustainable land use and logging. The efficiency of conservation initiatives should also be increased using participatory methods involving local, indigenous peoples and community-based forest management. Effective public awareness campaigns, robust law enforcement, and firm administration are essential to tree preservation programs. Building a culture of conservation and care requires educating the public about the value of trees and the effects of deforestation. Sustainable practices should be promoted, and public support for tree conservation should be mobilised through environmental education, lobbying campaigns, and involvement programs. To hold companies and governments accountable for their actions and to advance laws prioritising the preservation of forests and trees, groups, non-governmental organisations, and concerned people are essential.

7.0 CONCLUSION

This study investigated the ecological ethics found in Deuteronomy 20:19–20 and their relationship to the growth of ecotheology in Nigeria. The passage, which forbids the Israelites from felling trees in combat, emphasises the interdependence of humans and the natural world and highlights a critical biblical value of reverence for creation. By examining this passage, the research has demonstrated that the Bible supports ecological ethics, in which the environment is valued as an essential component of God's creation rather than merely a resource to exploit. Important discoveries show that, even in times of conflict, Deuteronomy 20:19–20 advocates for an environmentally sustainable way of living. This moral mandate is relevant to the current ecological issues facing Nigeria, as the country's people and land are under threat from deforestation, environmental degradation, and climate change. The study also emphasised how ecotheology—a strategy that unites religious faith with environmental stewardship—could be promoted within Nigerian religious groups by drawing on this biblical foundation. Therefore, ecotheology provides an essential means of addressing Nigeria's environmental issues, as it is grounded in biblical ideas, such as those in Deuteronomy. The incorporation of biblical ecological ethics into religious teachings is a compelling, spiritually grounded answer that might inspire faith to support environmental justice and sustainable development as Nigeria faces urgent ecological challenges.

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